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WOMEN ONLINE: BEIJING 1995

by Stacy Davis

E-mail and other forms of electronic technology are becoming increasingly instrumental in facilitating communication for the women's movement. In September, the United Nations sponsored the Fourth World Conference on Women and the parallel Non-Government Organizations (NGO) forum which created an historic opportunity for women around the world to communicate with each other and to directly participate by sharing their thoughts and ideas with those attending the conference in Beijing. Statistics reported by the official Xinhua news agency in China reflect that in addition to participants attending the events in person, an estimated 30 million people worldwide had access to the NGO forum via the Internet and e-mail.

Electronic technology effectively bridged the gap created by the Chinese government's strict media censorship of conference activities. Through the dedication of the San Francisco-based Association for Progressive Communications (APC), and the use of computers provided by Apple Computer, Inc. and Hewlett-Packard, women attending the conference were able to successfully circumvent the so-called "information vacuum" and thereby keep up to date with events unreported on Chinese television and radio. Women around the world had direct access to the same information, and electronic conferences were set up via e-mail to further encourage global communication.

World Wide Web sites including the APC's Women'sNet home page (<http://www.igc.apc.org>), were designed to provide accurate information about events as they occurred. The full text of Hillary Rodham Clinton's address to the conference, for example, was on the Internet within hours following her appearance. Amnesty International leader Pierre Sane's comments regarding women's human rights could also be found online, despite the fact that his simultaneous interpreter remained silent at the meeting. The World's Women Online! (<http://www.asu.edu:80/wwol>), an electronic art networking project, was also incorporated into the activities of the conference. Two electronic media walls constructed in Beijing and at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. intermingled footage from a video entitled, "The World's Women Online!" with Internet transmissions of imagery and text by women artists. The APC plans to maintain a "Beyond Beijing" bulletin board to track the commitments of governments to the conference resolutions and to provide a space for women to continue to communicate and plan for the future. In an effort to combat technophobia at the conference, the APC offered free e-mail accounts and training to those in attendance. Handbooks and helpful hints designed to provide free advice and training for women exploring cyberspace are widely available online.

Although the Internet has helped to shape the conference in Beijing and has established itself as a unifying instrument in the struggle for women's rights, it is important to recognize that not all women have access to this advanced technology. Basic connection difficulties have arisen for women and men everywhere, regardless of technological resources or economic means, due to the increasing number of limitations placed on Internet access. The Internet presents a challenge to autocratic regimes and threatens to break down the tight control traditionally exercised by the regimes over their citizens. Some governments, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, are trying to closely monitor who has Internet access as well as what materials are available online. The flow of information in cyberspace, however, is much more difficult to regulate and censor than traditional mediums. In Saudi Arabia, universities and hospitals are granted special

permission for Internet access and all such e-mail accounts are open to government inspection. Foreign businesses pose a threat by offering unlimited Internet access to business acquaintances, thereby circumventing government control; and skillful users have attempted to establish links to service providers in neighboring countries. Iran has gone so far as to shut down the country's only private Internet-linked firm. The Chinese government also closely monitors electronic communication and has threatened to censor offensive material.

While I have been free to sit at my computer and virtually observe the events in Beijing and the continuing exchange of ideas which swelled from the conference, it is important to recall the purpose of the forum and to pay attention to the reality of what words and promises were ultimately born there. A new network has developed in which information downloaded from the Internet passes through fax machines, telephone lines and paper media to reach women around the world. The Internet has proven itself to be a necessary and powerful tool in the struggle for women's rights, and we must continue to strive to overcome the social and economic barriers created by computers themselves.